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Kenneth M. Curtis was a 35-year-old political upstart when he took the oath of office as governor of Maine in January 1967. After an unsuccessful congressional candidacy and a term as secretary of state, Curtis entered the Blaine House not only talking about progress, but actually setting forth an agenda to achieve that goal. Although his initial months as governor were sometimes tumultuous, most of Curtis's eight years in office were marked more often by cooperation than controversy with the legislative branch. His ability to develop coalitions that moved his progressive agenda forward won him praise, some of it begrudgingly, from friend and foe alike. Nearly 20 years after he completed his two terms as governor, Curtis maintains a presence on Maine's political landscape, offering his advice and opinions where he thinks them appropriate.

Ken Curtis loves to talk politics and public policies, particularly when they concern the state of Maine. His affection for public life goes back to his childhood in Curtis Corner, Maine, where he was born 61 years ago. Growing up in a poor, rural community, Curtis rebelled against what he describes as elitist views of education and economics. "There was an attitude that higher education was for the elite," Curtis recalls. "I didn't like the idea of being ostracized because I was considering going to high school! Then I was told that if you wanted a good job it really had to come from within the family. You had to be a relative or a son of wealth or you really couldn't expect too much. I decided early on that if you had strong feelings about trying to contribute to make life better, the way to go was political action."

In an interview this fall with MPR, the former governor, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and former U.S. ambassador to Canada, shared his insights into the civic and political life of Maine and the nation. Not surprisingly, Curtis, currently president of Maine Maritime Academy, argues that many of our attitudes about the ineffectiveness and the unresponsiveness of government could be overcome by strong leadership from the executives of our federal and state governments. He asserts that our federal and state chief executives need to offer a vision of the future, put forth strong political agendas, and then foster cooperation, not conflict, in implementing the goals and objectives of those agendas.

Idealism and pragmatism

MPR: When you were governor, you faced a number of difficult challenges: You had the backlash to the initiation of the state income tax in 1969 and the subsequent effort to repeal it; you had the fight over eliminating the so-called "big box" on the election ballot; you dealt with an executive council and a legislature of the opposite party. How did all of those difficult challenges alter your view of public life?

Curtis: I would like to think I never stopped being an idealist, that maybe I did not even become any more a "realist." I would like to think that what I learned was the mechanics of managing

government and the mechanics of the legislative process. I would also like to think that my idealism was not necessarily dampened or destroyed but rather that perhaps the pursuit of my goals was a longer term process than I had wished. A lot of legislation that my administration implemented was executed over three or four legislative sessions. I learned to look at the goals as a pie. If I could compromise, I could get half of the pie this time. But the next time, I would go after the other half. I tried to think about the longer term when we might reach that goal rather than saying, as I think many idealistic people do, "I must have it all the first time around," or, "It is all or nothing."

I also learned how much most legislators and citizens really want to participate in the process, how they really, genuinely, want to do things. And I learned that through a lot of hard work and leadership, it is very possible to form coalitions of people to get things done. What I see lacking today in President Bush and in chief executives in Maine and in some other states as well, is a realization that neither a governor nor a president has a single legislative vote. Their only way of getting a program that they want is through a lot of persuasion, through leadership, and through working with the legislative branch.

There is a time and place for everything. There is a time and place to be political and it is necessary to be political at times to keep the people in your own political party on board. But there are also times to promote a greater cause. For example, Bush would blame Congress for not passing his legislative package. But if Bush could not get Congress to pass his legislative program, then the fault was not totally with Congress. What he was offering was not based on compromises where he had given something in return for their support. If he expected Congress to give, he had to give. That element seemed to be missing.

MPR: The "public interest" is a moving target. But by "public interest" we mean, "This is being done for the public good. This is where we should be going to produce a collective good?" Can we achieve that today? Or, have we broken down into too many self-interest factions?

Curtis: It is difficult to achieve that ideal "public interest" when we have so many different special interests now. The political parties are no longer anything more than coalitions of special interests. We do not have the broad umbrellas of the two-party system anymore. But on the other hand, I may have an overly-simplistic view having spent most of my time on the executive side.

I still think, however, that if there has been a break in the system it comes from a lack of vision and a lack of a strong agenda from the executive. You cannot expect a legislative branch to lead. Whether you are dealing with special interest groups or with the legislature, it behooves a president or a governor to have a very strong visible program as a starting point. This is where compromise can take place and where involvement can take place, so that you can advance much further than if you become polarized. The stronger the position, the stronger and the more visible the agenda set by the president or the governor, then the greater the opportunity to come up with something that, in a democratic sense, will more closely represent the will of the people.

MPR: Agree or disagree with his agenda, was not Ronald Reagan an executive who followed the model of a strong leader that you have described?

Curtis: Yes. Democrats used to say the trouble with Reagan is that "he is doing what he said he would do." His ability to articulate his position was very good, but he did not have the capacity to think critically about the programs he espoused. What he said came across as very simplistic, which was easy to understand if you were a voter. By contrast, Bush has been more of a modern day "computerized" candidate, which is very unfortunate. He follows the flow and does not really move forward with a very strong agenda. I do not think that he has strong convictions. I think he is an honest, decent man who really is a functionary.

Back to fundamentals

MPR: Is there a link between this lack of agenda, or running for office for the sake of running for office, and the professionalization of public life, the rise of government bureaucracy?

Curtis: I don't think that has been as serious at the state level as it has been at the national level. At the state level it is much easier for a legislator to be in touch with the people of the state than it is for somebody in Washington. I think if somebody rises to high levels in Washington, they tend to become insulated and lose touch a little bit. I think the problem on the state level is more of copying national campaigns. All of a sudden, to be a legislator you have to raise and spend money and do the same things that we see being done nationally. This year's election was extremely disappointing. In a small state like Maine, which prides itself on neighborliness and talking things out at town meeting, that candidates would have to resort to negative campaigning is sad. That simply drives up the cost of campaigning. A few years ago, state legislative and senatorial candidates pretty much stayed off television and campaigned in a more folksy, personal manner with their constituents. To see it go this way is a sad day for the state. I think the legislature should very seriously consider putting spending limits on House and Senate seats. The only thing more money does is just buy a negative campaign.

But, having said this, I would add that Maine is still small enough and rural enough so that many candidates are still very successful in getting elected to the legislature by simply visiting constituents and communities in their districts on a regular basis. This is true in both political parties. So, Maine is still better off than a lot of the country.

I still think that we need to go back to some kind of fundamentals. We need to wring the tremendous amounts of money necessary to run a campaign out of the process. We need to dilute the amount of money that is spent in advertising and on political consultants. It boils down to some kind of spending limits. To achieve this at the federal level requires public financing of campaigns to remove some of that total dependence on special interest groups. I think they corrupt the process.

We are doing much better in voter participation. Nationwide, it is becoming much easier for voters to become registered voters. Maine has been one of the leaders in this for a number of years. So we are not barring people from the polls to the extent that we used to. But money is one of the real corrupting issues. Some people are trying to get at this with gimmicks like length of campaign and term limitations. Those initiatives are born of frustration. I am not sure that any of those would make much difference. What changes if it still takes a lot of money to get elected? If the person who has been in for three terms has to step down, all that you've accomplished is to

get two other people competing using the same techniques. The one initiative that I do think is good, in Maine at least, is to reduce the size of the legislative body. I do not think that would hurt representation at all, particularly with modern communications systems.

Citizens and strong agendas

MPR: We are hearing, at least from the national level, and it may apply somewhat to the state level, that public life does not engage people, that citizens do not wish to participate for a variety of reasons, and that many do not know how to participate. Have you given any thought to what that public life should look like at the national level and what it should look like in Maine? How do you engage citizens?

Curtis: Again, I think it comes down to a very strong agenda on the part of our elected leaders. It is very important that there is something that people can relate to, something that they can either be terribly upset about or very much in favor of. That is what leads to citizen interest, involvement, and compromise, and, ultimately, to some kind of action. But when there is a floating agenda that is not very clear, that is never in one place, it is very hard for citizens to focus on it and to become engaged in the process. In that situation, people go back to single issues because they can say, "I feel very strongly about this or that" as if that is the whole reason for government to exist. As a leader, you could declare war on the rest of the world and that would be all right so long as you were opposed to abortion. This seems to be where we have gotten.

Beyond that, I think there is a negative perception that comes from modern day communications that affects all of this. The question becomes, how would a person get elected if they did not play this game of responding to special interests? The public now believes these are the rules that are set forth even though they do not like them and are very discouraged by them. The public now may say, "If he tells me the truth that he's going to raise my taxes, I don't want him. I would rather have somebody lie to me than to tell me the truth. Then I can say, 'Well these people are all alike anyway. He or she lied to me just as I knew he would or she would.'" I do not know how you get the public to look for a higher standard. How do you keep people from just buying what is fed to them through electronic means today?

MPR: Is not part of this attributable to people looking for panaceas, looking for easy solutions in a belief that everything can be solved, that government can do anything?

Curtis: There are a lot of crosscurrents that go through society. We still have a World War II mentality of standing up against the rest of the world that is still popular with a lot of people. This promotes the attitude that going into Panama and Grenada were great things for this country, when they were really embarrassments to a superpower. This particular crosscurrent makes defense and military popular causes. There is a second crosscurrent, which I attribute largely to the Reagan years, and that is the appeal to the greed factor or that making money and having wealth is very important. Of course, if you become greedy, you become selfish. Then one side of you says, "I want the person in office who says they are not going to raise my taxes. I want the person in office who says they are not going to spend my money for welfare cheats." I think that type of selfishness gets promoted to a very susceptible public. Then, there is a third

crosscurrent coming from middle-class Americans who are pressed to educate their kids, to pay a mortgage, and to make car payments. These people can be convinced to adopt more selfish, conservative views. They reach a point where they believe they simply cannot afford one more dollar on their tax bills to provide better education, even though they are for better education. So the candidates who must appeal to a broad enough base to get elected find themselves out of line with what they perceive as needs. They end up simply pandering to the people by saying, "We're going to get you a better job. We're going to give you better education for your kids. We aren't going to touch your taxes. We're going to do all of these things for you." People know that this is impossible, but yet they will vote for these candidates because it makes them feel better.

MPR: Voter surveys and public opinion polls are used by campaigns to tailor their messages to respond to these crosscurrents. You obviously used public opinion surveys in your campaigns. But how important were they? Did the polls that you used have the kind of influence they have today not only in shaping campaigns, but in dominating the media coverage?

Curtis: Polls are very valuable to find out what people are thinking and what people think of you. We did them early on in campaigns, because we had to decide what positive image we wanted to portray and what negative image we wanted to counteract. Then we would stick with that. You cannot change an image overnight because the voters are not that interested in you as an individual. It is silly to take a poll every day or every week and to jump around on the basis of the results. You cannot change your image that fast. Candidates, particularly when they run for president, seem to forget as the campaign goes on how they reached that point. They try to take on a whole new personality; they take on a "bigger" view of who they are. They get handed a speech and a script and they are on the road. It's silly; it doesn't work.

Personal politics

MPR: What do people who seek public office need to know about the citizens they are to represent?

Curtis: In today's political world there is not enough stress put on instinctive human relationships. More emphasis is placed on "scientific," sophisticated analysis of people. A good political candidate is someone who has a feel for the people in his district - what their problems are, how they think - rather than someone who relies on some kind of a scientific process. For instance, in my political days you could look at the statistics and you would conclude that there was a lot of poverty in the state. Therefore, people should be very glad that you were espousing a program to do something about poverty. But the people whom you concluded needed help, and whom you thought would probably welcome help, may not have be so grateful. It depended on how the help was presented to them. If you were to tell them, "You are below the poverty level and we are going to do something for you," you would totally offend them.

Political people need to understand the people they are representing, and that is hard to do, particularly for incumbents and especially for those on the Washington scene. They go to Washington, where senators are all-important. Everything they see and they read in that environment involves them and others like them. They can lose touch with the basic problems that their constituents face.

MPR: Is there any way that we can resolve that?

Curtis: First, you have the problem of the genuine politeness on the part of many people. Most people do not want to offend a prominent senator, so they do not tell the senator what they think. The handful who do speak up usually get written off as disgruntled kooks. It is very difficult to find a way to communicate with the voters. It means scheduling more time for the staff members who are out and around, and it means spending more time encouraging them to tell you what people are thinking. But staffers do not want to bring bad news either, and they are generally not encouraged to be the bearers of bad news.

MPR: Did you find that the case when you were in office in Augusta?

Curtis: Not really. Governors as compared to being in Congress or the Senate, are out constantly. You have a constant flow of legislators and people through your office. You are out five or six times per week to different parts of the state for a variety of functions. Even though people may be polite in many respects, you still can develop a fairly good sense from being immersed in that process. In Washington, it is much harder to remain involved in what is going on in your own state. I am not being critical of the system; this is just a difficulty that they face.

Responsible citizens

MPR: In his book, (*Kenneth Curtis of Maine: Profile of a Governor*, Harpswell Press, 1974), Kermit Lipez quoted you as saying that people ought to be looking inward, at themselves, if they are really displeased with politicians. Should we be seriously looking inward today?

Curtis: I think that we should. I was trying to say that public officials should be held to a little higher standard by virtue of the office they held. But I also was trying to say that if people criticize the greed factor or the lack of concern for other citizens in public life, then those people should look inward to examine their own motives. When voters are considering political candidates, do they want a political candidate who will protect their very narrow, selfish interest or do they want a candidate who represents much broader interests? If the public does not take the broader view, they will wind up with elected people who fall short of the caliber of officeholders we should have.

MPR: The shutdown of state government last year over the worker's compensation issue and "government by polarization" do not seem to reflect what we have generally considered responsible civic conduct by our elected representatives. With the recession, this response to crisis seems to be the standard, not only in Maine but also in other states. Do you agree?

Curtis: I think that's right. But if you look around, you will find some states that have functioned reasonably well during this crisis. You will find a stronger and more conciliatory executive in those states than in the others that have become polarized. A good friend of mine in Idaho, Cecil Andrus, who was governor back in my day and is again, has helped Idaho breeze through this recession when compared to other states. He is an excellent leader; he is an excellent manager; he is a pragmatic political person. His state was able to get its economy diversified fairly well and it goes pumping along. Now, if my successors as governor had ever really studied the

economics of an income tax, they would have recognized that during very good times, it gets overheated and it spins off large amounts of money. For political reasons, in my opinion, they decided, "Well, the best thing to do is to give this money back." But if they had been good fiscal managers, they would have used this period of an overheated economy to get the state's general financial condition in better shape. They would have paid off debt. They would not have bonded certain capital projects that they needed. But instead, they spent it down. Had the income tax been left alone, had it not be indexed, had some austerity and reorganization been practiced with the knowledge of what was happening around us and in the national economy, Maine would have breezed through this mess. That's not a fault of the legislature. That's a problem with executive management and executive leadership. Nobody likes to tax, but when we put the income tax in, we did it to avoid chaos. We needed a broad-based tax and a Republican majority agreed with that. It certainly was grossly unpopular, but it was fiscally the right thing to do. Had it been left alone, we would still be bearing the fruits from it.

Looking ahead, doing things for tomorrow is very seldom popular. It is unfortunate that somebody who governs through crisis management is considered to be a stronger leader than somebody who takes unpopular steps to avoid the crisis. But, I think the latter is the kind of government people should have.

Early civics intervention

MPR: There is a fairly widespread belief that civic education is not working, that civic education is not inculcating either the appropriate citizenship values or ideals in students. Do you have thoughts about how we should approach citizenship education?

Curtis: Effective civic education is a very difficult thing. I know some very sophisticated people, people with Ph.D.s, who do not really understand how government functions. They certainly could write a very professional analysis of the system. But they have not taken the time to appreciate and understand how it works. I don't know how you teach that appreciation except by continuing to stress the importance of the individual and the democratic system and the importance of participating. I don't know if you can go much beyond trying to keep students informed about issues, so that greater issue orientation is instilled in young people.

Perhaps we need to re-emphasize fundamentals of how the country functions. We should be aware of the serious problems around us, but we should also understand that there really is a vehicle to effect change. Perhaps we can excite a few students to think, "Yes, I want to be part of that process." Perhaps more idealistic, better-informed future political leaders are born out of the commitment that they learn in the classroom to become part of solutions in their life, and from understanding that solutions <u>are</u> possible.

MPR: You must have been interested in politics and public life at a young age. Did your interest develop in the home or in school?

Curtis: Both contributed to the realization that political action is a route to solve problems. I had teachers who were very good. They were strong Republicans, or strong Democrats. They expressed their views in kind or a tongue-in-cheek way that stimulated interest by students.

Those teachers joked about the fact that they were Democrats or Republicans, but they still got a point across. There are still a few teachers who get that into the classroom, but I do not think that there are enough. There is nothing wrong with being a teacher who is very concerned about what is happening around them. I think that a lot of teachers are afraid to express those concerns in the classroom today.

MPR: It may be a wrong impression, but it seems that we have less discussion about issues of the day, in and out of the home, than was true a few decades back. Is that your impression as well?

Curtis: We had more small communities with a local drugstore or little lunch counter where people went to buy the Sunday paper and have a cup of coffee. People would just start talking about local concerns and national events; and it was sort of a ritual to go to those places. I agree that is being lost. Our kids are less likely to hear this discussion at home; there is less time for conversation in the home then there used to be. Everybody is working so hard. No family sits around the table very often to have a discussion. Kids gulp down their food and run to the television set - and they are not watching the news!

Then...and now

MPR: When you were in office you talked frequently about "progress." That word seems to have disappeared from our political lexicon. Nobody talks about progress anymore. What might that signify?

Curtis: It may not be a word of this decade, but I think that progress is still at the center of public debate. When we talk about jobs or when we talk about international competition, we are talking about progress that we need within the community and the nation. We still talk about balancing economics and the environment, the same issue that has been alive since the '60s. But perhaps the word "progress" does not evoke the images to the people that it did then. In Maine in those days, many people saw us - and I think rightfully so - as being somewhat of a backward state. So "progress" seemed to be one word that could define what we needed to accomplish in so many areas.

MPR: Given your assessment of the present state of politics and public life, could you run for public office today?

Curtis: The probability of my winning would not be very good, although, I hope that I would be sophisticated enough to understand there still is a way to get elected without submitting to what appears to be today's techniques. I would like to see candidates with more of an agenda when they run for office, some indication of the personal reasons they would like to be in office, and what they want to accomplish. I think that some of that is lacking today. That is not to say that most people do not have very good intentions. But I don't know if they really have a burning agenda of what they want to fight for.

Ideally, anyone who participates in public life ought to have a strong personal agenda, a real strong reason why they want to be in public life. It has to be something that goes far beyond an

ego trip or personal ambition or power. It has to be a real agenda of something that they very much would like to accomplish. If people would start with that premise, they would find public service to be extremely satisfying. It is not without brickbats, criticism, and hard work. But if you really believe deeply in something, the sense of accomplishment is extremely exhilarating.

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